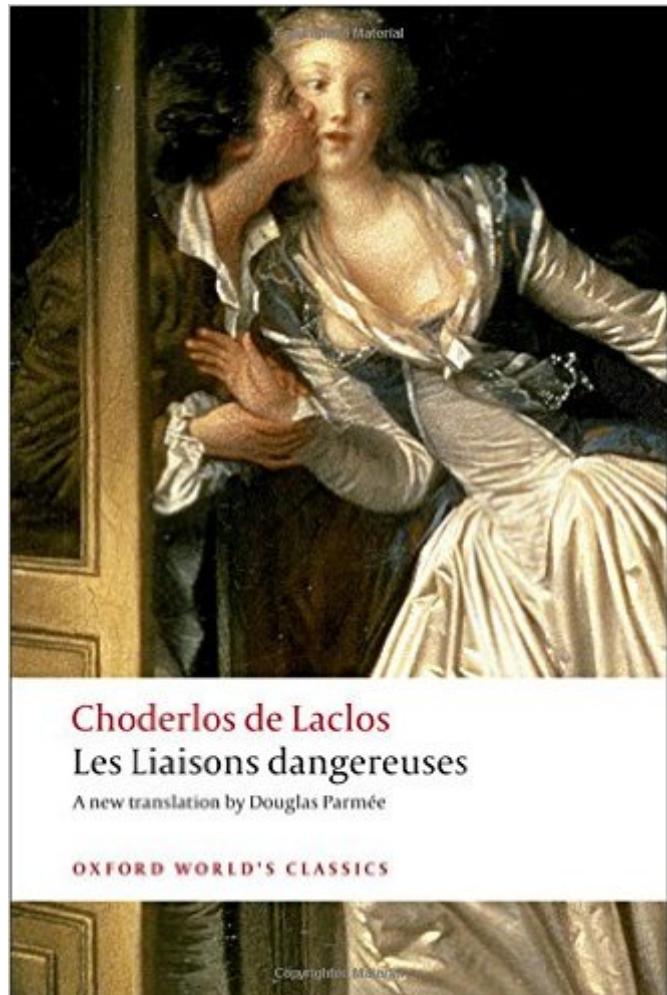


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Les Liaisons Dangereuses (Oxford World's Classics)



Synopsis

The complex moral ambiguities of seduction and revenge make *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) one of the most scandalous and controversial novels in European literature. Its prime movers, the Vicomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil--gifted, wealthy, and bored--form an unholy alliance and turn seduction into a game. And they play this game with such wit and style that it is impossible not to admire them, until they discover mysterious rules that they cannot understand. In the ensuing battle there can be no winners, and the innocent suffer with the guilty. This new translation gives Laclos a modern voice, and readers will be able to judge whether the novel is as "diabolical" and "infamous" as its critics have claimed, or whether it has much to tell us about a world we still inhabit.

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Customer Reviews

Choderlos de Laclos' epistolary novel has been made into at least three film versions, but none of them come nearly up to the real thing. Laclos' story of evil and depravity, starring a pair of jaded aristocrats so satanic we wonder if they have a human bone in their bodies, is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, novels of the 18th century. In a nutshell, it revolves around the cynical plot to

seduce and destroy the reputation of a young girl fresh out of her convent, which they plan and achieve with the icy calm and cynical detachment of a pair of mathematicians solving a calculus problem. The anti-hero and anti-heroine of this book, the Vicomte de Valmont and the Marquis de Merteuil, fascinate and repel us at once by their sheer wickedness. Valmont is a depraved Casanova, lay-em-and-leave-em, who has lost count of all the broken hearts and destroyed characters he has left in his wake. The Marquise de Merteuil, married and widowed too young, has combined shrewd intelligence with appalling powers of deception to engage a string of lovers whom she uses and casts off at random. Somehow these two find each other and form an unholy partnership. When the book opens, their affair is already spent, but they have remained friends; and the Marquise is infuriated when she learns she is about to be dumped by her current lover, a rich aristocrat named Gercourt, who is about to marry Cecile de Volanges, the most naive teenager who ever emerged from the protective cocoon of convent education. Her main attraction, for him, is her virginity, and it is this the Marquise wants Valmont to do away with so that Gercourt will find out on his wedding night that he didn't get the innocent virgin he was expecting, but an already corrupted young woman, and will become the laughing stock of Paris. Seducing and abandoning an innocent girl is an old story to Valmont, but he has more pressing concerns; he is hopelessly in love with a young married woman, Madame de Tourvel, whose virtue seems impregnable. And here he appears as more sympathetic and human than the Marquise; even if he's trying to seduce a married woman, he, at least, is capable of love; something which is beyond the Marquise, who sees other people as nothing more or less than objects to be used or cast aside. It's only when he finds out that Cecile's mother has been telling Madame de Tourvel his scandalous life history that he decides to seduce Cecile, to pay back the mother for messing in his business. At the same time, he perseveres in his pursuit of Madame de Tourvel. But just at the point of victory, the Marquise turns his very strength, his ability to love, into a weakness; she uses it as a weapon against him to make him think his love for Madame de Tourvel is contemptible. At this point, we see the real conflict in the book, Valmont against the Marquise. But Valmont, as cynical and jaded as he is, is no match for this lady; her very emotional detachment makes her unassailable. Valmont doesn't have a chance. He's not only destroyed the Madame de Tourvel, he's also destroyed himself. It looks like the Marquise is the sole victor in this combat. But is she? Fatally, the Marquise has forgotten that letters can be dangerous weapons, and she's written a few too many. What goes around comes around. Laclos's book caused a sensation in its own time that reverberated for decades afterward; 40 years after its publication it was condemned by a criminal court and publicly incinerated in a mass book-burning ceremony. If Laclos had still been alive then, they might have wanted to toss him on top of the pyre.

Whatever feelings the book may have aroused when it was written, it has endured for two hundred years since as a masterpiece of literature in any language. Any book that has been the basis of three different films, each unique from the other, has to be saying something to modern readers. Laclos' book says a great deal and says it magnificently. Judy Lind

I purchased the Oxford Classic edition of *Les Liaisons*, translated by Douglas Parmee, and much to my chagrin, found the text to be riddled with poor writing and literary anachronisms. Parmee may be accurately transliterating the French original; I of course cannot read it. But the book he has produced borders on the unreadable. Cecile, an aristocratic French girl of 15, speaks like a besotted 60-year old English gentleman. "Fortunately Mummy's feeling much better today and Madame de Marteuil is coming with the Chevalier Danceny and somebody else but she never comes until late and when you're all alone for such a long time, it gets jolly boring." (pg. 32) Yes, you read that right, "jolly boring." In Parmee's translation, Cecile uses "jolly" quite often, but somehow I cannot imagine a beautiful if naive French girl ever saying "jolly" anything. Also gone is the tense sophistication of the Vicomte and the Marquise's dialogs in the movie--in its stead it seems that Parmee has elected to give them the voices of two American High School students, void of all intelligence, charm and wit, leaving them with just enough arrogant cunning to move the plot. Throughout all the letters, there are a great deal of run-on sentences which require a great deal of effort to understand, a characteristic of bad writing. I've read a few pages of the LiÃ©vre translation and can plainly see that it is much improved. I recommend you purchase that version and leave this one well alone, as I plan to do.

Many people have seen one of several movie productions of this book and assumed that it is a modern story that has taken the 18th century as its setting. In fact, the book was written at that time, and it provides a shocking, thrilling, sexy window into the lives of the French aristocracy. It is a thing of beauty. The exploits of the central characters make your average daytime soap opera look tame, and it is all done with a cunning and an evil grace that went out of style with the French Revolution. Language is used as an aphrodesiac, a lever, and occasionally a cudgel, and since the book takes the form of the published letters of the main characters we hear it straight from the pens of those involved. "Les Liaisons Dangereuses" will make you mourn the invention of the telephone. Such skill with the written word! The double meaning was king, with muddled intentions as its queen. Read this book: you really must. If you love language it will become a favorite of yours, just as it did for me.

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